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Introduction

In the early 1450s, an encounter between the two giants of Timurid intellectual life took place in Herat. The more senior of the two, Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī (*ca.* 770–858/1370–1454), one of the most celebrated of the literati in Iran and Central Asia at that time, had established himself as a highly regarded historian and expert occultist. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), the younger of the two was a poet with strong ties to the Naqshbandī Sufi network in Khorasan, and his reputation was growing year by year as his publications spread all over the Persianate world from Central and South Asia to Anatolia and the Balkans. If we are to believe Jāmī's biographer, Bākharzī (d. 909/1503–4), the meeting was a total disaster. As the two conversed, their discussion led into some doctrinal issues on Sufism and, according to Bākharzī, Jāmī was obviously eager to know what his elder companion had to say about various contradictory propositions stated by the Sufis. Jāmī, according to Bākharzī's story, understood that Yazdī had spent his entire life exploring these issues, and so thought there could be no better person to ask. Yet, Yazdī's response left Jāmī with the suspicion that he was probably missing an important point in his understanding of his counterpart during this discussion. Yazdī said: "Oh my son! I made a contract with God that I would no longer have this kind of conversation with anybody on these issues."[1]

For Bākharzī, Yazdī must have appeared to be in a rather sorry shape: disappointed, disillusioned, and an outright failure. The encounter above is indeed a sad epilogue to an illustrious career which had

[1] Bākharzī, *Maqāmāt*, 106–7. This meeting will be discussed in more detail later in pp. 78–81.

spanned the entire reign of Shāhrukh, son of Timur, in Iran and Central Asia in the first half of the fifteenth century. In a nutshell, this book is an attempt to understand and contextualize the frustration that Yazdī displayed in this conversation toward the end of his life, as is witnessed in his response above.

HISTORIAN, OCCULTIST, AND INTELLECTUAL

Born to an affluent local aristocratic family from Taft, a small town southwest of Yazd in Iran, Yazdī spent his youthful years traveling to major cultural centers of the Islamicate world, including Tabriz and Cairo. He entered Timurid courtly circles in the first decade of the fifteenth century and worked for successive Timurid princes from Pīr Muḥammad b. ʿUmar-Shaykh (d. 812/1409) and his brother Iskandar b. ʿUmar-Shaykh (d. 818/1415) to Ibrāhīm-Sulṭān b. Shāhrukh (d. 838/1435). In 850/1446, Yazdī was implicated as one of the instigators of the rebellion of Sulṭān-Muḥammad b. Bāysunghur (d. 855/1452) against Shāhrukh. The rebellion was brutally suppressed by Shāhrukh, and Yazdī barely escaped execution, thanks only to his expertise in the mathematical and occult sciences. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, son of Ulugh Beg and a great-grandson of Timur, suggested that Yazdī should be sent to Samarkand to work in Ulugh Beg's observatory. Upon Ulugh Beg's death, Yazdī returned to Yazd, where he died in 858/1454.

An extremely gifted author, Yazdī's prose style was considered peerless in his own time and this certainly helped him in securing prominent positions in the Timurid princely courts. Although he wrote poetry under the pen name of Sharaf, Yazdī was above all a historian; at least, this has been his foremost claim to fame ever since the early modern period, not only in the Islamicate world, but also in Europe. His *Ẓafarnāma*, the history of Timur that he wrote for Ibrāhīm-Sulṭān and that was translated into French in 1723, is arguably one of the most influential Persian prose texts written in the late medieval Persianate world. The florid style and rhetorical ingenuity of the *Ẓafarnāma* were endlessly emulated by generations of Islamic intellectuals until the dawn of the modern period.[2] As

[2] I use the term "intellectual" in this book to avoid the vocational associations of such terms as Sufi, *ʿālim*, *faqīh*, etc. In an age when the educated elites of society were engaged in scholarly and vocational pursuits in more than one and often in overlapping fields, the term "intellectual" seems to be the most appropriate way of developing a holistic view of various forms of intellectual activity. For a similar use of the term in a comparable context, see Furey, *Erasmus*, 171.

a historian, he was admired and exalted, but, in his own time, Yazdī was a much larger figure. Not only did he excel in historiography, he earned his reputation mainly as a prominent practitioner of various occult sciences, including *muʿammā*, "gematria/cryptographic poetry," and *wafq*, "magic squares."

In one sense, Yazdī had everything. To begin with, his prominent and wealthy family supported his education and provided an environment to which he often returned, even in his advanced age. He also enjoyed the unhindered support of multiple Timurid princely courts throughout his life, and his works in the fields of historiography and the occult sciences formed the classics of Islamicate literary culture in the early modern period. Why, then, did Yazdī feel so frustrated at the end of his life?

The fundamental contention of this book is that the rise and fall of Yazdī's fortunes, both as an intellectual and as a Timurid courtier, were intricately tied to the expansive intellectual network of which he was a part and which he had cultivated ever since his adolescence by traveling widely, as far as Cairo and Samarkand. In other words, the frustration that Yazdī expressed to Jāmī was not simply a personal feeling, but also a reflection on half a century of engagement with a network of scholars in which Yazdī had played a prominent role.

NETWORKS: FORMAL AND INFORMAL

Modern historians have been fascinated by the scholarly and artistic output of Timurid intellectuals ever since the time of the great Russian scholar Vasiliy V. Barthold (1869–1930), who was arguably the true founder of the field of Timurid studies in the twentieth century. Barthold argued that the engines of intellectual life in the fifteenth century were the Timurid princely courts. According to Barthold, Timurid cultural efflorescence was the ultimate fruit of the fusion of the creative forces of the Turco-Mongol and Perso-Islamic cultures that had been galvanized by the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century. The case in point for Barthold was Ulugh Beg, son of Shāhrukh and governor of Transoxiana. Ulugh Beg was very attached to Turco-Mongol political principles, but he also appreciated the value of Islamic learning and scholarship. Besides being an impressive scientist himself, he also attracted the most creative brains of his time to his observatory in Samarkand. The Samarkand Observatory hosted such prominent scientists as Ghiyāṯ al-Dīn Jamshīd-i Kāshī, ʿAlī Qushji, Qāḍīzāda-yi Rūmī, and, briefly, Yazdī as well. It was in

Samarkand that these scientists produced the *Zīj-i Sulṭānī*, an astronomical table that revised Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's thirteenth-century *Zīj-i Ilkhānī* and remained the standard work in astronomy for more than a century.[3]

Ulugh Beg was indeed an exceptional figure, but he was not alone in Barthold's list of great patrons of the arts and sciences in the Timurid Empire. Other Timurid princes achieved similar feats in cities under their rule. For instance, the high point of Timurid cultural creativeness in Herat fell under Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bayqara (d. 911/1506), who helped construct in Herat a center of literary production. From Jāmī to ʿAlī Shīr Navāʾī and from Mīrkhvānd to Sulṭān-Ḥusayn himself, the most eloquent pens of the Persianate world gathered at the court of this learned Timurid prince.[4] As argued by Vera Tolz recently, what was underpinning Barthold's thinking was his deep suspicion of nineteenth-century Orientalist taxonomies, including the separation of an imaginary "East" from an equally imaginary "West." Like all other students of Victor Rozen in the late Tsarist and early Soviet periods, Barthold, by placing Russia in its proper historical context, attempted to open up a space for a more progressive Russian culture by deconstructing the mental taxonomies of nineteenth-century humanistic scholarship.[5]

Later research would confirm that Barthold was at least a century ahead of his peers. Since the early 1980s, a number of publications, initially spearheaded by art historians, have demonstrated that the Timurid princely courts were indeed a vital factor in the rise of the Timurid scholarly and cultural efflorescence of the fifteenth century. There was an evident political backdrop to this historical phenomenon. The Timurid dynasty was organized along the principle of corporate sovereignty where each branch of the dynasty had equal rights to exercise political authority in its own appanage. This resulted in the emergence of multiple princely courts and centers of power, and the competition between these courts fueled cultural and intellectual production. The impressive inventory of manuscripts, buildings, and other objects that were commissioned by the Timurid princes is a testimony to Barthold's brilliant acumen and has therefore invited the label of "renaissance" for the Timurid period,

[3] Scientific activities in Samarkand during Ulugh Beg's reign are relatively well documented thanks to the surviving correspondence of Ghiyāṯ al-Dīn Jamshīd-i Kāshī (d. 832/1429), one of the astronomers and mathematicians who worked at the observatory in Samarkand. See Bāqirī, *Az Samarqand*, 32–53. See also Fazlıoğlu, "The Samarqand," 3–68.

[4] Barthold, *Mussulman Culture*, 71–5; Barthold, *Ulugh-Beg*, 129–43.

[5] Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, 47–68.

aptly applied in particular by art historians, soon followed by historians in general.[6]

Yet the paradigm of patronage, while emphasizing the role of the patron, often lacks one important element: the intellectual. The princely patronage paradigm explains why a building or artwork was created, but it offers very little to our understanding of its aesthetics and style. The gathering in Timurid princely courts of intellectuals with similar aesthetic, ideological, and political orientations tells us more about a given prince's mindset than the intellectuals' scholarly formation. This issue has been raised previously by several scholars. In a series of groundbreaking articles published in the 1950s, Jean Aubin studied the convoluted relationships between Timurid and Turkmen rulers, nascent Sufi orders, and other urban intellectual networks in the fifteenth century.[7] Aubin took into account the prince's role in scholarly and artistic production, but he defined the figure of the intellectual within his or her network of peers outside the courtly realm. For Aubin, patronage became an effective tool for artists and their patrons only in the matrix of intersecting intellectual networks. Aubin was certainly aware of the potency of intellectual authority, which had a transregional reach extending from the Balkans to Goa. Even a cursory look at the final page of his masterful article "Le mécénat timouride à Chiraz" reveals Aubin's awareness of the extensiveness of Timurid intellectual networks. In just a few lines, Aubin mentions all the important personalities who will figure in multiple chapters of this book:

> Upon the recommendation of Shāh Niʿmatullāh Valī, Ṣāʾin al-Dīn Turka and Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī traveled to Syria to study the science of letters from Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī. We know almost nothing about Akhlāṭī, but we know that one of his pupils, on whom he exercised great influence, was involved in a great socio-political agitation in the Ottoman state: Shaykh Bedreddīn.
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> Even if these few scattered clues are proof of nothing, they outline behind the conventional features of a "Timurid Renaissance" certain lineaments of a social conjuncture, in which patrons and patronage found their proper place.[8]

[6] The list of studies dealing with Timurid courtly patronage is too long to be included in a short footnote. For a general overview with specific references to art objects, see Lentz and Lowry, *Timur*, 67–157; Brend, *Muhammad*, 22–37. See also Subtelny, "Socioeconomic Bases," 479–505; Subtelny, *Timurids*, 36–9; Roxburgh, "Baysunghur's Library," 11–41. For the architectural heritage of the Timurids, see Golombek and Wilber, *The Timurid Architecture*. For the impact of the Mongols on interregional cultural exchange in the early modern period, see Allsen, "Mongols," 135–54.

[7] See the following by Jean Aubin: *Deux sayyids*; "Note," 123–47; "Le mécénat," 71–88; "Etudes Safavides I," 37–81; "De Kûhbanân à Bidar," 233–61.

[8] Aubin, "Le mécénat," 87–8.

Aubin never articulated what the connections between intellectuals amounted to, nor did he develop his ideas beyond their immediate context. Instead, he chose to trace the bare "lineaments of a social conjuncture" without ever delving into the world of the fifteenth-century intellectuals in question. Another note of caution on the patronage paradigm came from the polar opposite end of the scholarly spectrum. S. A. M. Adshead, a historian of late imperial Chinese history, was the first to characterize Timurid intellectual networks as a republic of letters. According to Adshead, the Timurid dynasty was the largest, and one of the first, of the "Renaissance monarchies" to be founded in the early modern period.[9] It was partially due to Adshead's vague prose and admittedly idiosyncratic style that the book did not have the intended impact on scholarship, but it certainly addressed an important issue:

> Unlike the basic information circuit, the microbian common market and the global arsenal which were the result of diffusion, the republic of letters was the result of convergence. It was, so to speak, a federal republic of *Lände* [sic]. It was the product of the convergence of local and regional republics of letters, though it was eventually to find a first center in the Paris-London-Berlin triangle. Enough has been said about the Islamic republic of letters, and the Timurid contribution to it. Something needs to be said about the European and Chinese republics and about the context of renaissance in general prior to their federation.[10]

This quotation clusters too much information to bring together in a small book, and the present book certainly disagrees with the point, made in passing, regarding enough having already been said about "the Islamic republic of letters." However, whether Adshead's work was badly written and supremely pretentious or whether it was simply ahead of its time is beside the point; what matters is that his book addresses a very important question, one at the core of this present study. Intellectual authority in the fifteenth century was – to quote Jason Josephson – "a transnational product of contested asymmetries of power." An intellectual of the period was not simply subject to princely authority; he or she needed to respond to a wider cosmopolitan network of peers who shared similar aesthetic, religious, political, and ideological persuasions.[11]

[9] Adshead, *Central Asia*, 127. [10] Adshead, *Central Asia*, 145.

[11] Josephson, *The Invention*, 5. See also Brockliss, *Calvet's Web*, 68–125. The literature on medieval Islamic networks is still in its infancy. For the cosmopolitan urban space that the intellectuals created through their travels, see Zaman, "Transmitters of Authority," 595–9. See also Cornell, "Ibn Battuta's Opportunism," 31–50; Szuppe, "Circulation," 1010–18; Dallal, *Islam, Science*, 50–3. For the contacts between the citizens of the

Among the fifteenth-century intellectual networks, Sufi networks have been studied in the greatest detail. In this period, distinct Sufi communities, which previously had been organized around influential Sufi figures, began to acquire an institutional character distinguished by several features, including: the principles of the master–disciple relationship, spiritual lineage (*silsila*) connecting disciples to a leading Sufi shaykh, the veneration of tombs, distinct rituals that provided an identity marker for members of the Sufi community, and a substantial amount of Sufi literature that served to reinforce all of the above. Sufis in various guises increasingly saw themselves as not only participants, but partners in politics. It is certainly not coincidental that it was exactly during this time that more and more Sufis assumed titles such as *shāh*, sultan, and *khalīfa*, and that some Sufi shaykhs created states within states. In the context of Timurid history, the formation of the Naqshbandiyya in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has attracted particular scholarly attention. It evolved out of various competing Khvājagān lineages that were loosely organized around the name of Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 791/1389) and the ethos of various forms of *zikr* (remembrance) and *silsila* (spiritual lineage).[12] Albeit to a lesser degree than that of the Khvājag ān-Naqshbandiyya, other Sufi networks which originated in Central Asia and Iran, such as the Yasaviyya, Kubraviyya, and Niʿmatullāhiyya have also enjoyed sustained scholarly interest in recent decades. Today, no serious scholar can claim that the Naqshbandī order was founded by Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband or that the early history of the Naqshbandī order was a linear development from its eponymous founder to Khvāja Aḥrār (d. 895/1490), who effectively established the order as a spiritual, political, and economic enterprise.

European republic of letters and those of the Middle East, see Hamilton's introduction in Hamilton et al., *Republic of Letters*. Recent studies convincingly demonstrated that trade networks overlapped with information networks. It is plausible to assume that informal intellectual networks were part of an overlapping web of information flow, but we need further research to demonstrate this point. For exemplary studies, see Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, esp. 86–120, and "Reader Response," 31–70.

[12] Devin DeWeese's work in recent years has revolutionized our understanding of Sufi networks in the post-Mongol period. DeWeese argues that Sufi networks, or *ṭārīqa*s, were never strictly defined or rigid corporate entities. Instead, they demonstrated a remarkable communal diversity, which was facilitated mainly by the flexibility of Sufi lineages (*silsila*). See, for instance, DeWeese, "Spiritual Practice," 251–300. Following Shahzad Bashir's lead, I prefer the term "Sufi networks" as opposed to "Sufi orders." Bashir argues that the term "Sufi order" creates the misapprehension that the type of internal cohesion and discipline observable in Christian monastic institutions could also be observed in Sufi communities. See Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 11–13; 78–104.

The extent and reach of these Sufi networks notwithstanding, they were not the only intellectual collectivity that rose to prominence in the fifteenth century. İhsan Fazlıoğlu and Cornell H. Fleischer have demonstrated that there were other intellectual networks in the fifteenth century, the organizational models of which did not correspond to the formalism of the Sufi networks.[13] Fazlıoğlu and Fleischer studied the intellectual network of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī (d. 858/1454), an Ottoman occultist with an expansive oeuvre on the science of letters (*ʿilm-i ḥurūf*). Al-Bisṭāmī was active in the Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia in the early fifteenth century, and his network included scholars from diverse backgrounds with a clear commitment to a Hermetic project and the occult sciences. Al-Bisṭāmī's autobiography, which is our main source for this intellectual network, never shies away from revealing the names of his peers, nor does he pretend to be a member of a clandestine organization. Al-Bisṭāmī was a participant in a virtually invisible community which modeled itself after the tenth-century Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ (Brethren of Purity), famous for their "Treatises" (*al-Rasāʾil*), the encyclopedic work that they composed. Either because of the Pythagorean and Neoplatonic philosophical orientation of the Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ or the shroud of anonymity which lent both authority and mystery to their *Rasāʾil*, al-Bisṭāmī decided to use the name "Ikhvān al-ṣafā" to refer to the anonymous peers with whom he claimed to entertain contact in the fifteenth century. It appears that this was a widespread intellectual network created by its participants' own volition. The fifteenth-century Ikhvān al-ṣafā, as described by al-Bisṭāmī, lacked the formal organizational or institutional dimensions that we observe in the Sufi networks.

There is evidence that, like his contemporary al-Bisṭāmī, Yazdī also belonged to this intellectual network. Geographically, Yazdī's circle was centered around figures from Isfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd in the Timurid Empire who were also connected to several figures in the circle that made up the Ikhvān al-ṣafā of al-Bisṭāmī. Al-Bisṭāmī's and Yazdī's networks were akin to what is often called an informal network, or a "Republic of Letters" in the early modern period. In modern parlance, an informal intellectual network is based on personal contact, communication, or correspondence between the participants. The members of an informal network often share similar philosophical, political, ideological, religious, and aesthetic sensibilities. The exchange of letters or pamphlets,

[13] Fazlıoğlu, "İlk dönem," 229–40. See also Fleischer, "Seer to the Sultan," 292; "Shadows of Shadows," 55.

the commitment to a methodological principle or to the bonds of friendship and family ties, the occasional attention of a particular patron, as well as not infrequent actual encounters among members kept such networks together and functioning. Participants in these networks preferred to call themselves citizens of a Republic of Letters, a term which has come to be an expression of the growing influence of informal networks in early modern Europe. Such cases of informal networks, or a Republic of Letters for that matter, are defined mainly by peer-to-peer relationships, hence displaying little or no hierarchical stratification. They were interregional and not territorially bound, a feature that made their participants true cosmopolitans. These informal networks were also important nodes for the transmission of clandestine heretical, messianic, irreligious, or radical ideas, along with various degrees of freethinking, and they often included people who openly challenged established religious and political structures.[14]

The questions of how to study informal networks or of how to detect their existence in the first place within this context are not easy to answer. Informal networks were transregional organizations transcending political boundaries. They were *not* restricted to the Timurids and Timurid courts, and were additionally widespread in the Ottoman and Mamluk milieus. For the time being, we are in a very early stage of research – at least as far as late medieval and early modern Islamicate history is concerned – in determining how these networks were really organized, what the nature of their organizational style was, and how hierarchical they were. Unlike formal networks, informal networks almost never inscribed their presence in hagiographies, genealogies, or certificates (*ijāza*s), and, unlike Sufi groupings, they were not held together through the veneration of shrines or shared rituals to be performed. They were also different from the local reading communities, which brought local scholars and artisans together in well-structured and hierarchically organized reading groups, but which lacked the interregional reach and philosophical and methodological consistency that the informal networks demonstrated.[15]

Recent scholarship has established that the most common, universally accepted, and effective method for working on informal intellectual networks in the early modern period is to study the correspondence

[14] In this summary assessment, I rely on the following studies: Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words*, 9–34; Thomson, "Informal Networks," 121–36; Summers and Pebworth, *Literary Circles*; Goldgar, *Impolite Learning*; Furey, *Erasmus*.
[15] Hirschler, *The Written Word*, 32–81.

that the intellectuals left behind. As research libraries and archives have adjusted to the digital revolution of the early twenty-first century, so have unexplored caches of private letters become more easily accessible to researchers, opening up a world of which, until very recently, only glimpses could be perceived by only the most assiduous archival historians.[16] In the fifteenth-century Islamicate context, we have had mixed luck in documenting the correspondence networks through private letters. There exists a relatively large number of *munshaʾāt* (collections of letters and treatises), which have been perused by the scholars of social, economic, and diplomatic history.[17] Recently, with the gradual appearance in print of those *munshaʾāt* belonging to various intellectuals, we are reminded that the *munshaʾāt* are invaluable sources for intellectual and cultural history as well.[18] The term *munshaʾāt* is loosely used in secondary scholarship for two types of genres: prescriptive works, which provide theoretical discussions and guidelines for epistolography, and descriptive works, which generally include only examples of letters.[19] Descriptive *munshaʾāt* may occasionally include more than just letters: short treatises, introductions penned for other intellectuals' works, fragments from the known or unknown works of a specific author, tombstone inscriptions, as well as copies of official documents.[20] With these diverse characteristics, the descriptive *munshaʾāt* should really be termed "miscellanea," namely, collections of pamphlets and letters rather than simply of letters.

The letters and pamphlets of Yazdī and his teacher Ṣāʾin al-Dīn ʿAlī Turka, who will figure prominently throughout this book, are collected in a series of manuscripts which can only be described as a "*munshaʾāt* cycle" – comparable to an epic cycle – as they include numerous samples of the same or similar texts, yet each of which still maintains its autonomy. Yazdī's *Munshaʾāt* (*Munshaʾāt-i Yazdī*) is a descriptive *munshaʾāt*

[16] A quick glance at the Cultures of Knowledge – Networking the Republic of Letters database, which was supported by a gamut of international organizations and launched in 2015 at the University of Oxford, should suffice to support my argument here. See www.culturesofknowledge.org (accessed 14 March 2015).

[17] Roemer, *Staatschreiben*, 16–20; Ṣifatgul, *Pizhūhishī*, 122–3.

[18] For a general overview, see Mujtabāʾī, "Correspondence," 290–3.

[19] Sometimes one person produced works in both genres. The most prominent example in our period is the famous Bahmanid vizier Maḥmūd Gāvān, who also had an intimate relationship with Yazdī. Maḥmūd Gāvān's *Manāẓir al-inshāʾ* is a prescriptive work, but his *Riyāż al-inshāʾ* is a descriptive work which brings together Gāvān's letters.

[20] Muʿīn al-Dīn Zamchī Isfizārī (d. 915/1510), who was an epistolographer of the later Timurid period during the reign of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bayqara, treats the writing of the *muqaddima* or *dībācha* under a separate heading in his *Munshaʾāt*, which is in this sense a rather prescriptive type of work. See Isfizārī, *Munshaʾāt*, ff. 151a–74b.